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STORIES OF BEGINNING TEACHERS: FIRST YEAR CHALLENGES AND BEYOND

ALYSIA D. ROEHRIG, MICHAEL PRESSLEY,
& DENISE A. TALOTTA, EDS.
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS, 2002
\$15.00, 231 pages

Reviewed by Lori Moreau

Baptism by fire is an expression often associated with the experience of beginning teachers. Every autumn, neophyte educators embark on a journey through uncharted, unpredictable waters as they enter the classroom for the very first time in the capacity of teacher. The research of Roehrig, Pressley, and Talotta is an opportunity to look into the classroom windows of a group of young, beginning teachers to discover, ponder, and celebrate the challenges that these professionals faced during their first year of teaching.

The authors of this book are affiliated with an innovative teacher preparation program established by the University of Notre Dame, the Alliance for Catholic Education Program (ACE). Students in the master's program at the university are involved in a summer session of education coursework, followed by a year of service as the teacher of record in a school in the southern United States. After completion of this phase, the students return to Notre Dame for a second summer, and finish with a second year of teaching. The

authors selected participants for their study from candidates who seemed predisposed to success in the classroom. While it is impossible to control every variable in a study such as this, the common foundation of participants adds validity to the findings.

The authors used grounded-theory analysis to review the current research and previously published case studies of new teachers. Their objective was to identify a common body of specific challenges faced by those who are entering the field of education. After identifying over 500 discrete challenges, these indicators were organized into 22 categories. Given this specific set of anecdotal categories, the authors created a framework for quantifying the occurrence of those experiences identified as most often present in the literature on beginning teachers. The authors provide an excellent description of the 22 major categories addressed in the study, along with an exhaustive list of sub-indicators for each area.

The method used in the Notre Dame research involved the preparation of a questionnaire containing one question for each of the 571 challenges. Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of each occurrence on a scale of 0 (*never this year*) to 5 (*every day or almost every day*). All participants had completed their first summer of coursework and were mid-way through their first year of teaching in a Catholic school when they received the questionnaire. The teachers were equally represented across the levels of kindergarten through 12th grade. Participation in the study was voluntary, with 50 responses received from first-year teachers and 27 responses from second-year teachers. The sample was determined to be culturally diverse and represented by approximately the same number of males and females.

At the heart of the book are eight chapters submitted by participating first-year teachers from the ACE program. The case studies draw the reader into the personal lives and classrooms of these teachers as they reflect on the major challenges they faced during their first teaching assignment. The stories of these beginning teachers would touch any reader, regardless of whether or not the reader is familiar with the field of education. But those who are not new to education know well the truth that lies in these narrative accounts. No one enters education without first journeying through the trials and tribulations of that initial school year.

The teachers were placed in Catholic schools which were predominantly serving low-income families. Many of the schools were faced with challenges of minimal available curriculum, under-staffing, high population of at-risk and special needs students, and in general, very limited teaching resources. The neophyte teachers reflected on their first year of teaching and provided an honest analysis of the difficulties and triumphs they encountered.

The first teacher the reader meets was assigned to a school with an

extremely poor population in an urban setting where gangs, drugs, and violence were prevalent. The school site was run down and suffered from an infestation of mold. This young teacher faced the challenge of having few curriculum materials by researching and borrowing books and other resources. On the first day, she was ready to dive into her carefully prepared lessons, but learned after a short time that nothing she planned would sufficiently address the needs of her assigned class. Her students were incredibly diverse and suffered from a variety of emotional and cognitive issues. This teacher shares with the reader,

Academics were not a priority for me during the first few months of school. The children were not ready to learn reading, math, and writing; they first needed to learn about hope, trust, and inner peace. I couldn't establish order without giving these children a classroom community where they felt safe, loved, and important. I realized this after several weeks, and it was difficult for me to accept that I was failing to provide the class with any of this. (p. 87)

Feelings of frustration, doubt, and guilt permeate the stories shared by the teachers. Another teacher summarized her first year as "extremely challenging," and wrote,

I can honestly say that it was a humbling year. But it was also extremely rewarding. There were many days that I wondered if this was my true calling and if I was really teaching the students and doing them any good. However, every time I doubted, I would see a smiling face or receive a hug from one of my little ones or a compliment from a fellow teacher, and I would know that teaching is where my heart is. I think that as long as I keep an open mind to change and improvement, I can make it. (p. 115)

Also included in the study was a separate section of interviews that were conducted in a different manner. To increase the likelihood that day-to-day challenges would be reported, participants were called on three to four separate occasions over the course of the spring. This section included data from both first- and second-year teachers. The teachers were asked questions about what challenges they faced on that given day, as well as qualifying questions about how serious the challenge was, how frequently it was experienced, probable causes, and success rate for resolution of the problem.

In general, the findings gleaned from the stories and phone interviews cluster around a fairly common set of experiences. The most frequent categories reported by over 50% of the group were discipline, dealing with student misbehavior, motivating students, coping with students' individual differences, and planning. The authors report that over half of the challenges were identified as relatively infrequent (i.e., happening once or only a few

times during the year). The difference in the responses of males versus females was statistically insignificant. The findings across elementary, middle, and high school were similar in terms of the number of challenges identified, but varied according to the types of experiences reported. Analysis of the results also found that the “clear majority of frequently encountered challenges are about students” (p. 52). While this may seem obvious given that schools are in the business of serving children, it is important to note that many of the 22 categories described challenges that are not necessarily student-centered, although these were lower in frequency. Some of these areas were classified as personal life issues (not having spare time or enough time to be adequately creative); conflicts with school culture and low expectations; conflicts with other faculty; lack of content knowledge; and difficulty in planning for instruction.

A number of key findings emerged as a result of this study. Many beginning teachers who read the book will be glad to learn that second-year teachers perceived fewer challenges as serious when compared with the impressions of first-year teachers. “Life in school gets better for young teachers as they acquire experience, even the little bit of experience that distinguishes first- from second-year teachers” (p. 68). Another reason for beginning teachers to take heart is that the data from this study indicate that dealing with individual differences among students and challenges posed by students were most often cited not just by first-year teachers, but by veterans as well.

There are many implications for teacher preparation, mentor teachers, and post-licensure development that flow from the findings. Teacher preparation programs need to provide a strong foundation in understanding and reaching students with challenging behaviors and students with diverse needs. Beginning teachers have to learn from experience; however, personal reflection may not be enough to reduce the number of education students who do not finish their program, or beginning teachers who quit after only 1 or 2 years. To this end, teacher preparation programs should also have a strong mentor component with opportunities for discussion and feedback from experienced professionals on a frequent basis.

Mentor teachers and professionals who develop teacher preparation programs will find this book with its real-life, emotionally charged case studies to be a practical and relevant tool for communicating the realities of teaching. The individual who is preparing to enter the classroom for the first year would do well to learn from the experiences detailed in this book. It is not the intention of the authors to cause the reader “to believe there is nothing to fear or to believe that beginning teaching is an overwhelming experience” (p. 223). Rather, newcomers to the field will benefit from knowing that there is a common experience set for all first-year teachers: “The young teacher definitely should not feel that being challenged is a sign of failure as a begin-

ning teacher” (p. 224). Armed with this knowledge, along with adequate pre-service training in strategies for responding to challenges, our future young teachers will have an improved opportunity for success in the classroom.

Lori Moreau is principal of Father Anglim Academy for children with special learning needs in Ft. Myers, Florida.

THE GOOD TEACHER MENTOR: SETTING THE STANDARD FOR SUPPORT AND SUCCESS

SIDNEY TRUBOWITZ & MAUREEN PICARD ROBINS

TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2003

\$17.95, 133 pages

Reviewed by Pat Bronsard

The Good Teacher Mentor: Setting the Standard for Support and Success is a book written to examine how a first-year teacher, “a professional-in-training,” develops through his or her relationship with a seasoned mentor teacher. The book constructs a view of the year-long mentoring relationship between a novice seventh-grade teacher, Maureen Robins, and her mentor, Sidney Trubowitz, in an urban public middle school in New York. The book takes a personal look at the interactions of their partnership, how the process affected them, and the professional satisfaction both teachers felt at the end of the year.

In the introduction, Trubowitz and Robins provide their readers a general history of mentoring in the training and retaining of teachers and the motivation for writing this book, noting that the concept of mentoring has been part of educational training since the early 1980s. The authors see mentoring as a solution to the problems of many districts that struggle to locate and to retain qualified teachers. The topic is of importance because of “chronic teacher shortages and an attrition rate of almost 30 percent of all beginning teachers” (p. 2). These statistics have policymakers and educational leaders